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Nearly One in Five U.S. Students Attend Rural Schools. Here's What You Should Know About Them

By Evie Blad on November 7, 2019, 1:29 AM



More than 9.3 million U.S. students attended a rural school last year, a number larger than the combined enrollment of the nation's 85 largest school districts, a new report finds.

But, despite their collective impact, rural schools sometimes lack the resources of those in more populous areas and they often get less attention, says the newest edition of "Why Rural Matters," released Thursday by the [Rural School and Community Trust](#).

Many rural students live in poverty, some lag behind in academic achievement, and many are taught by teachers with relatively low pay, says the report, which provides a state-by-state look at a range of factors that affect rural students' education. And logistical factors, including geographic isolation, can make it difficult for rural students to access things like advanced courses and for their schools to engage in improvement efforts.

"While some rural schools thrive, others and their communities continue to face devastating obstacles in the education and well-being of children," Robert Mahaffey, the executive director of the Rural School and Community Trust, said in a statement. "Leaders in every state and our nation's capital must work together to better address the issues facing rural students, schools, and communities with great haste."

The report, which uses a definition of "rural" from the U.S. Census Bureau, finds the median enrollment for U.S. rural districts is only 494 students. Using factors like per-pupil funding, poverty rates, and student mobility data, it ranks states that it deems the highest priority for those concerned about rural education, providing individual profiles for all 50 states. The top five priority states are Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.

Here are some other key findings.

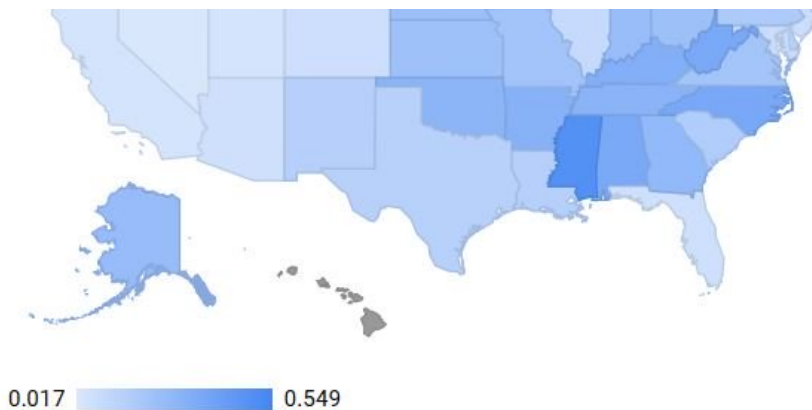
When Rural Schools Are Few, Their Needs Are Less Prominent

At least half of public schools are rural in 12 states: Montana, South Dakota, Vermont, North Dakota, Maine, Alaska, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Iowa, and Mississippi. But many rural students make up a much smaller share of their state's enrollment, which can make their needs seem like a lower priority, the report says.

"Rural schools and students often seem invisible because many leaders never encounter these communities directly or lack a full understanding of rural America's challenges," the Rural School and Community Trust says. "The majority of rural students attend school in a state where they make up less than 25 percent of public school enrollment. More than one rural student in four lives in [a state] where rural students constitute less than 15 percent of overall enrollment."

The map below, pulled from the report, shows the percentage of rural students in each state, ranging from 1.7 percent in Nevada to 54.9 percent in Vermont.





Rural Students Lag in AP But Lead in Dual-Enrollment Programs

A smaller percent of rural students earn passing score of three or higher on Advanced Placement exams than those in other areas, the report finds. Authors calculated that figure by dividing the total number of students from rural districts who scored a three on at least one AP test by the total number of juniors and seniors in those districts. By that measure, 9.5 percent of rural students succeeded at AP tests, compared with 19 percent of all public high school students, 18.8 percent of urban students, and 24.1 percent of suburban students.

But juniors and seniors at rural high schools were more likely than peers in other areas to take dual-enrollment courses, the report finds. Twenty percent of male students and 26 percent of female students at rural high schools took at least one dual-enrollment course. That compares to 14.4 percent of all male students and 17.8 of all female student nationwide.

Academic Performance

In a majority of states, rural students outperformed their non-rural peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the report finds. But they lagged behind in some states. And, as in schools as a whole, rural schools showed gaps in achievement between students from low-income households and their peers from more-affluent families.

Read the whole report, and see all of the state profiles, [here](#).

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